Regular headline reminders of event safety and security tragedies combine with a forecast for a continued healthy market, making now the perfect time for meeting and event professionals to shore up contingency plans.
Not long before Hurricane Irma, an association that was planning a large convention and trade show in Florida turned to Tyra Hilliard, CMP (MPI North Florida Chapter), an attorney based in St. Simons Island, Ga., for advice. Attendees were assuming the show would be canceled and were calling the association to confirm. The association wanted to move the event to a different date, in a different city, but was not sure what the contractual consequences would be.

The association’s hotel said it would let the group out of the contract if it brought future business, but there was a hitch: The convention center was planning to be open. The association did not have cancellation insurance. There was a force majeure clause in the contract, but, says Hilliard, it was “very one-sided and it was not clear from the wording that it would apply until the hurricane actually struck and made the facility unavailable.”

Working through a third-party planner, the association managed to negotiate arrangements where it would move the show to a city in the Northeastern U.S. for October 2017 and hold another one in 2018 in the Florida destination it was not able to use.
That’s how they managed to get this flip-flopping-city solution,” Hilliard says.

Situations like this one are, unfortunately, not unique these days. Given the seemingly constant stream of headlines about Atlantic hurricanes, earthquakes in Mexico, forest fires in the West—as well as news of terrorist attacks, protests beset by violence, mass shootings like the one at an outdoor concert that killed 58 people in Las Vegas and tensions with North Korea—many meeting professionals are bringing more emphasis to "meeting defense," or protecting their meeting. The latest Meetings Outlook survey found that given the many unpredictable events that can disrupt meetings or cause a crisis, industry professionals are giving fresh attention to details such as contract clauses they may have to exercise if a meeting must be cancelled, as well as aspects such as emergency communications.

“I’m finally getting more meeting planners to ask about creating a crisis plan and asking insurance questions,” says Hilliard—who, in the past, often heard comments such as, “We usually don’t get insurance.”

Still, with many competing demands on their time, meeting professionals are preparing for some scenarios more than others.

“That seems that priorities are being driven by awareness,” says Bill Voegeli (MPI Georgia Chapter), president of Association Insights, the Atlanta-area research firm that conducts the survey. “My sense from anecdotal data is people are approaching those

**LEAST PREPARED**

(Percentage of respondents with no plans)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Incident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>53%</td>
<td>Vehicular Violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>52%</td>
<td>Crowd Stampede</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Air- and Water-bourne Disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36%</td>
<td>Emotional Distress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31%</td>
<td>Attendee Arrest/Altercation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
MGM Resorts International

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things that have more of a predictable set of actions and reaction associated with them.”

Despite the preparations they are making for the more predictable events, many are increasingly concerned about gaps in their planning.

“We know people are seeking professional advice,” Voegeli says. “What we don’t have a good handle on is exactly what resources are being used to identify reliable sources of advice.”

In response to requests from a growing number of clients who want to be prepared, Global DMC Partners has introduced a standardized “event safety plan” that is customized for each event. To create the safety plan, the DMCs fill out the form with pertinent information about the event, including information about the venue, such as a local emergency phone number, the location of the fire exits and possibly a diagram of the building, working with the venue and vendors to make sure it is complete.

“If we’re at a hotel, their plan is usually what we are going to go with,” says Shawna Suckow, CMP, founder of SPIN: Senior Planners Industry Network.

WEATHERING ADVERSITY

One type of threat for which many meeting professionals seem to be most comfortable preparing is weather. In the survey, 47 percent of respondents said they have a generalized response in place, and 46 percent said they have a specific plan of action. Only 8 percent said they do not address this.

“We know about natural disasters, incoming weather, usually,” Voegeli says. “We usually know pretty far in advance and it gives us time to prepare.”

When Hurricane Irma was looming, for instance, the Orlando-based Orange County Convention Center’s leadership team quickly began working with the Orange County Office of Emergency Management to monitor the storm and determine if it was safe for the facility to remain open, according to Kathie Canning, executive director of the Orange County Convention Center. During that time, sales managers and event managers kept in close contact with the planning teams for events scheduled to take place in the 10-day window before and after Hurricane Irma was expected to come through Central Florida.

“While we can prepare for inclement weather, we cannot control it. **What we can control is how comfortable our clients feel about any changes that need to be made to work around such weather events.**”

KATHIE CANNING
Executive Director
Orange County Convention Center

GREATER EXPENSES

The costs of essential meeting- and event-related services are expected to grow more than the U.S. Consumer Price Index of 1.9% over the next year. Meanwhile, the projected change in meeting/event budgets is a mere 0.8%.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Service</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Air travel</td>
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<td>F&amp;B/Catering</td>
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<tr>
<td>A/V</td>
<td>+2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting rooms</td>
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</table>
“While we can prepare for inclement weather moving through Central Florida, we cannot control it,” Canning said in an email. “What we can control is how comfortable our clients feel about any changes that need to be made to work around such weather events. In the case of Hurricane Irma, we successfully worked with seven shows to keep them informed about the ever-changing and unpredictable path of a serious storm. We were able to accommodate those who wished to keep their event at our location and we look forward to welcoming them later this year with Florida’s signature sunny, blue skies.”

Similarly, Michael Brill (MPI New Jersey Chapter), owner and managing director of Medals LLC, a meeting planning firm in Milltown, N.J., that primarily focuses on medical meetings, didn’t waste any time in 2012 when it became clear Hurricane Sandy could disrupt a meeting in Atlantic City he had arranged for 38 veterinarians. As former director of global academic and professional affairs at Merck, he had previously dealt with a number of extreme weather-related situations, such as a tsunami in Thailand that caused him to cancel two meetings, and knew being proactive was key.

“In the case of the Atlantic City meeting, Brill says, “The first thing was to talk to the sponsor and say, ‘We think this is really serious. We think we need to try to reschedule.’”

The sponsor—a small company—was reluctant because of the potential financial consequences, but Brill’s team pointed out, “If one doctor gets hurt by the hurricane, you won’t even have a company anymore.”

When, about four days before the meeting and two days before the hurricane, the forecasts grew worrisome, Brill’s team contacted the hotel and asked if it had any relationships with inland properties. Fortunately, they did. He was able to move the meeting to a property in Pennsylvania without penalty and, in return, agreed to plan another meeting in Atlantic City within the next 12 months.

“We had a good relationship with the sales manager of the chain,” Brill says, “It was all about the relationship.”

But many meeting professionals have not focused on less common natural threats that could potentially be just as disruptive to a meeting, the survey found. For instance, while 42 percent of respondents said they have a generalized plan for air- and water-borne disease, just 19 percent said they have a specific plan of action and a whopping 40 percent said they do not address this.

One reason so many don’t address this threat may be that they expect medical authorities, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to take the lead if the situation is serious.

“Preparation is not as valuable since the CDC is going to prescribe actions to be taken in response to that particular threat,” Voegeli says.

DEALING WITH VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT
In today’s political climate, conflict at meetings and violent disruptions are top of mind for many. When asked if there is an increase in the likelihood of contentious or conflict-oriented conversations or personal challenges during their meetings and/or events—or if they had experienced them—43 percent of respondents said yes.

Many meeting professionals are now actively planning ahead to prevent such hazards. Among survey respondents who said there is an increase in contentious or conflict-oriented challenges to meetings, concern about this development influenced “some change” in security planning for 66 percent, in session topics for 64 percent, in marketing and/or promotion for 66 percent, in room design or layout for 66 percent, in keynote speaker selection for 66 percent, in security planning for 66 percent, and in overall event planning for 66 percent.

Business Conditions
A stable business environment is still indicated, with some signs of slowing or uncertainty. Predictions for business growth over the next year are stable at 2%.

57% of respondents predict FAVORABLE business conditions
20% of respondents predict NEUTRAL business conditions
23% of respondents predict NEGATIVE business conditions

Impact of Contentious Conversations
A large percentage of industry professionals (43%) claim to have experienced an increase in contentious or conflict-oriented conversations or personal challenges during their meetings and events. Following are components of meetings and events that have been changed significantly or cancelled as a result, and the corresponding percentage of respondents reporting each.

Session Topics 27%
Security Planning 20%
Keynote Speaker Selection 13%
Level of Engagement Between Speakers and Attendees 13%
Room Design or Layout 12%
Marketing and/or Promotion 11%
or promotion for 57 percent, in speaker selection for 53 percent, in room design or layout for 52 percent and in the level of engagement for speakers and attendees for 56 percent.

Meeting professionals are not only concerned about conflicts that take place within the physical boundaries of an event venue. For some meeting professionals, geopolitical tensions are also a big concern.

“Today, South Korea is a very big Asian market for pharma,” Brill notes. “Right now, if you’re an American and you want to sponsor a meeting in Korea or even if there is a medical congress you feel obligated to attend, you always have to pre-plan. Whether you are doing the meeting yourself or managing with the DMC, you need to have a failsafe program in case something goes wrong.”

Many meeting professionals are particularly concerned about the threat of physical violence. Although tragedies like the one in Las Vegas underline how much more work there is to be done in safeguarding the public from active shooters, meeting professionals reported being more prepared with specific action plans for this scenario than other violent situations covered in the survey. Among respondents, 45 percent said they have a specific plan of action for this and 29 percent said they had a generalized response to this. Only 26 percent said they do not address this.

Similarly, 43 percent said they have a specific plan of action for bomb threats, and 35 percent said they have a generalized response. Only 22 percent said they do not address this.

“The bombing in the U.K. at the Ariana Grande concert has changed the way people are looking at security,” Suckow says, as event planners always took steps to secure the inside of such arenas. “Now they are doing perimeters further out.”

The May 2017 suicide bombing outside of the arena took place as concertgoers were exiting and killed 22 people.

As for other acts of terrorism, 48 percent of survey participants reported having a generalized response prepared, 28 percent have a specific action plan and 25 percent do not address this.

But other types of violent threats that have been in the news are not being covered as extensively in meeting professionals’ planning. Vehicular violence—which killed 16 people in a terror attack in Barcelona this past summer and resulted in the death of a woman at a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Va.—is one case in point.

Among respondents, 53 percent admitted they do not address vehicular violence. Only 10 percent have a specific action plan for this and just 37 percent have a generalized response in place.

Whether this is because they hold events where vehicular violence would be unlikely or they are not aware of the best way to handle such threats is unclear.

“You can scan people for weapons and bombs, but it’s hard to scan them for keys to their van and assume that’s a weapon,” Voegeli says. “Those types of devices that are known as weapons are more easily identified and manageable than those devices not easily recognized as weapons, like an automobile.”

Suckow found it useful when Michael Dominguez, senior vice president and chief sales officer of MGM Resorts International, spoke at an event she attended about how parking dump trucks on the street had been helpful in keeping vehicles away from an event in Boston.

“That may be a plan if you’re having a street party and you don’t want anybody to be able to drive through somewhere,” Suckow says. “Maybe that’s how we could mitigate that.”

Technological and logistical threats are an area where many meeting professionals seem to be comfortable preparing for disruption, perhaps because these challenges have existed on a significant scale for years. For instance, when it comes to data breaches, 44 percent of survey participants reported having a generalized response to them, while 29 percent have a specific action plan. And when it comes to labor strikes, 51 percent have a generalized response in place, and 26 percent have a specific action plan.

**READING THE FINE PRINT**

One thing is clear: Regardless of the particular types of threats that may beset their meetings, many planners are paying more attention to factors such as contract clauses in the event of cancellations, by attendees or even their venue. Planners and suppliers reported changing expectations on policies, docu-
mentation of meetings, risk assumption and cooperation in the survey.

Lindsay Buchanan, CMP (MPI Tennessee Chapter), manager; meetings, association management and groups at Trav-\(\text{\textregistered}\)link, American Express Travel, is among them. In April of last year; Buchanan, based in Nashville, got an email that a hotel had cancelled the upcoming January meeting of an association she represents in San Francisco.

“It caught us off guard considerably,” she says. “We’d had the contract for three years at that point.”

A conversation with the hotel’s general manager revealed that the association had been bumped in favor of a client that was willing to pay a higher room rate and more for food and beverage.

“They were willing, in a sense, to sever our relationship for future events in return for the additional money,” Buchanan says.

Unfortunately, the group’s contract did not have a clause covering what damages would be paid if the hotel canceled. Thanks to a great relationship with the hotel’s national sales representative, the association was able to negotiate a relocation of the event to New Orleans. However, Buchanan’s group changed its policies after that.

“For any contract that we do, we have a damages clause in the cancellation section or a separate clause that says cancellation by hotel that explains what our cancellation policy is,” she says. Her group has several clauses that are adequate, but if none get approved by the hotel, she says, “we usually give our recommendation to the client that we don’t contract with that hotel if they are not willing to insert that clause.”

As she has learned, damage prevention is a lot easier than damage control.

GLIMPSE AT CURRENT EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FULL-TIME</th>
<th>PART-TIME</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECREASE</td>
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<td>5%</td>
</tr>
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Safety and security concerns continue to take center stage as natural disasters and manmade threats draw global attention. Join us for MPItv News video coverage, the Meetings Outlook edition, as we dig deeper into the data to ensure your contingency plans are updated and effective.